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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000601

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STATE FOR SCA/FO, SCA/A, S/CRS
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG
NSC FOR JWOOD
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CG CJTF-82, POLAD, JICCENT

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SUBJECT: KARZAI CONVENES HIGH-LEVEL NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL
MEETING ON ELECTORAL TIMING

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 4, President Karzai convened a three-hour meeting of key national and international players to try to sort out the issue of simultaneous elections. His goal was to lay out positions, allow the internationals to make their case directly to Afghan leaders, and, presumably, to broaden as far as possible responsibility for whatever decision emerges.

¶2. (C) On the Afghan side, participants included Hazara Vice President Khalili, Tajik Lower House Speaker Qanooni, Pashtun Senator Sayyaf, Pashtun Sufi leader Pir Gailani and his son Deputy Senate Speaker Hamed Gailani, Tajik United Front leader Rabbani, Hazara Senator Mohaqqueq, several ministers, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. In Karzai, Qanooni, and Mohaqqueq, the three highest vote-getters in the 2004 presidential elections were represented. On the international side were the chiefs of mission of the US, UK, Canada, Germany, and the UN, as well as ISAF Commander General McNeill.

¶3. (C) Karzai called on Ambassador Wood first. The Ambassador expressed support for simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections, primarily on security and financial grounds, and called for an early decision so the electoral registry could be begun and donors could prepare to contribute. He made clear that the decision on electoral timing was up to the Afghans. He also supported development of political parties. All international speakers, who followed in order, supported the US position. General McNeill affirmed that elections represented a security challenge, but promised that ISAF would dedicate forces to protect them whenever held. He also noted a willingness to provide a short/short-term surge, if necessary.

¶4. (C) The Afghans were divided. All government representatives supported simultaneous elections. The Attorney General, the Minister of Justice, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court also argued that interpretations of the constitution would allow simultaneous elections in the autumn of 2009 without requiring amendment of the constitution. On the Senate side, Sayyaf and Mohaqqueq both opposed simultaneous elections, while Hamed Gailani and Rabbani straddled the issue. For the Wolesi Jirga, Qanooni,

even though professing personally to be in favor of simultaneity, said that the chamber had voted almost unanimously against cutting short their term of office by a year in order to permit simultaneous elections, and that most constitutionalists had advised that the parliamentary elections date could not be changed without amending the constitution.

Comment

¶5. (C) The discussion went as expected. The government supports simultaneous elections, as does the international community. But the members of the Lower House do not want to cut short their sinecures by almost a year, and those who are thinking of running for president, especially Qanooni, do not want simultaneous elections to force them to choose between the race for the presidency and re-election to the parliament. Qanooni's ploy of calling a vote in the Lower House before the issue was ripe, which opposed simultaneity, makes clear his true position.

¶6. (C) In view of the strength of the opponents, who include the majority of elected officials in the national government, there is no way to force simultaneous elections without amending the constitution. If an effort to amend the constitution were made, there is no way to ensure that amendments would be limited to the electoral timing issue. Amending the constitution requires convening of a Loya Jirga (grand assembly) that functions as a constitutional assembly. The Loya Jirga would be capable of taking up any issue it wishes, not just the issue for which it was convened, so the whole constitution would be open to change. In the divided

KABUL 00000601 002 OF 002

political environment that prevails, there is a real chance of political breakdown if the government tried to force the timing issue or if the constitution were re-opened.

¶7. (C) The government will make another run at reaching broad agreement on simultaneous elections, then probably will opt for presidential and provincial council elections in the autumn of 2009, and parliamentary and district elections in ¶2010.

WOOD